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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000494

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/10/2016

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN REGIME CRITIC RIAD SEIF ON STEPS TO  
INVIGORATE OPPOSITION

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: Prominent Syrian opposition leader Riad Seif discussed on May 18 intensified preparations for the expansion of the Damascus Declaration (DD) group into an opposition National Congress, and also touched on the upcoming presidential referendum, and relations between the USG and critics of the Syrian regime. Repeating a common theme of his, Seif stated his belief that the Syrian opposition needed to develop a more positive, nuanced relationship with the U.S. The DD was boycotting the presidential referendum but was not asking the general public to do so because it understood that a large percentage of potential voters felt compelled to vote in order to avoid future trouble with security services, Seif said. When asked what the USG could do in the run-up to or after the referendum, Seif suggested the USG criticize the referendum as completely divorced from any democratic process but avoid giving it too much attention. Seif said that the USG and others could make a significant difference to the internal opposition by finding ways to provide financial support to the families of political prisoners. End Summary.

12. (C) EXPANDING THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION: In a meeting in his downtown Damascus office with A/DCM and Poloff, Seif described his intensified efforts to expand the current DD group, which he leads with a steering committee of 34 people, into a National Congress with 120 members from across Syria. The new members would include well-known political activists from across Syria, as well as tribal and Kurdish leaders, a wide spectrum of religious leaders (including moderate Islamists), and respected academics and writers, Seif said.

13. (C) The DD hopes that the Congress can hold its first meeting in two months at which time it would announce its formation publicly, Seif said. The Congress would seek to gain the Syrian people's recognition as a liberal secular group. It also has sought members who each have enough prominence and clout in their own communities that the regime would not be able to disassemble the organization by arresting the top five to ten persons, which Seif viewed as a real possibility. The Congress would supplement the DD and seek to implement the group's goals announced in October 2005, which called for major political and legal reforms in Syria. The Congress would also serve as a potential source of alternative leadership, in the event that a political vacuum occurred in Syria, asserted Seif, who in the past has voiced a belief that the formation of an international tribunal in Lebanon could lead to some sort of undefined leadership change in Syria.

14. (C) The DD is working hard to keep the idea for the

Congress a secret, despite increased pressure from security services to monitor his personal activities, Seif said. If the Congress is formed, next steps will include the formation of committees that deal with a wide range of issues, including foreign relations, Seif said.

15. (C) Returning to a common theme voiced in regular discussions with A/DCM over the past 18 months, Seif stated his belief that the Syrian opposition needed to be more realistic in its understanding of the West's Middle East policies and in particular needed to develop a better relationship with the U.S. Several influential DD members are pan-Arab nationalists, with ideologies that have traditionally expressed hostility towards the U.S. and the West. Seif expressed hope that as DD members gained more exposure to the U.S., this "complex" would be abandoned. He added that his meetings with recent U.S. CODELs, led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and members Frank Wolf and Darrell Issa, had broken the ice for some members of the internal opposition, who had previously said there was no possibility of dialogue with the United States. Now, Seif said, the challenge was for the opposition to work on common goals with the U.S. and Europe, in ways that would not allow the regime to characterize such efforts as treasonous or counter to Syria's interests. Seif also emphasized the need for the USG, for its part, to adopt a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

16. (C) Turning to the May 27 presidential referendum, Seif noted that the DD had announced its intention to boycott the referendum, as it is "not the right way to the right president." At the same time, the DD had decided not to risk its credibility by asking the general public to boycott a referendum in which voters felt obligated to vote to avoid

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future trouble with security services, Seif said. "When they see that saying yes means nothing, and saying no means trouble, people will vote even if they hate the President." Seif added that in 1998, 100 percent of the workers in his factory had gone out to vote for Hafez al-Asad to avoid trouble with security services and police.

17. (C) In the run-up to the vote, the regime was devoting significant effort and money to transform Syrian President Bashar al-Asad into the symbol of Syria and Syrians. They want to make him into an untouchable personality, in the style of former President Hafez al-Asad, Seif asserted, although Bashar has no charisma or discernible political skills. The referendum serves as a good catalyst for this transformation, which is also linked to the regime's fear that Asad will be held accountable by Lebanon's international tribunal, and to the regime's conviction that Syrians will be more apt to rise to his and the regime's defense if Bashar has made himself such a symbol of Syria that any effort to hold him accountable will be seen as an attack on the dignity of Syria, Seif indicated.

18. (C) When asked about the self-declared candidacy of Syrian lawyer Abdullah al-Khalil, who is from the northeastern city of Raqqah, Seif said the Khalil was a legitimate member of the opposition, and even a proposed candidate for Seif's National Congress, but was not well-known nationally and was unlikely to influence the referendum process. Seif added that the security services would never have been so tolerant of a publicly proposed candidacy by a more well-known regime critic. "The regime strategy since Hafez al-Asad has been to prevent any real leaders from coming up," said Seif. Khalil had made public his desire to seek the presidency and then left for Turkey, noted Seif, who was unaware if Khalil had come under any pressure by the security services.

19. (C) When asked what the USG could do in the run-up to, or after, the referendum, Seif asserted that it would not have much impact for the USG to take an extremely tough, insistent

stance on the referendum, since "every Syrian knows already the voting won't change anything." In the event of a statement, Seif suggested the USG could say that the referendum has nothing to do with the democratic process and that the USG looks forward to the day when Syria will choose its president in a democratic way.

¶10. (C) Returning to another common theme, Seif said that the USG and others could make a significant difference to the internal opposition by providing financial support to the families of political prisoners. "We need to encourage political activists in a good way not to be afraid of the regime, and to demonstrate that even if they are jailed, their families will be taken care of," he stated. A few hundred thousand dollars, a million dollars would do a lot," he added. Seif noted that the wife of detained human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni had recently been fired from her civil service job, and the wife of Kamal Labwani had been pressured and harassed into quitting hers. The DD continues to support the families of some political prisoners but not adequately and lacks the means to do a comprehensive effort, said Seif, noting that the group does not support the Labwani family because DD member and Socialist Union chief Hassan AbdulAzeem, with his particular Nasserist, pan-Arab nationalist prism, sees Labwani as "traitor for the Americans." DD recently paid for an operation for the son of imprisoned civil society activist Riad al-Drar, while the son of political prisoner Mahmoud Issa still needs an operation, reported Seif.

¶11. (C) Currently, DD members raise money among themselves for such contributions, which are collected by three trusted members of the group and distributed to prisoners' families, said Seif. Syrian businessmen are afraid to contribute because the regime would not tolerate it, said Seif, citing the case of a former prisoner who spent 20 years in jail for his connections with the Muslim Brotherhood and then was re-arrested for providing aid to the family of a prisoner in Aleppo. Seif said that after the formation of the National Congress, he hoped to find a channel, via Europe, to finance payments to the families of political prisoners, noting wryly that it would be the best form of foreign investment in Syria. Still, the great difficulty, he acknowledged, lies in finding a channel for funds, which is non-transparent, with the least amount of bureaucracy possible.

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¶12. (C) COMMENT: Seif seemed focused almost single-mindedly in this meeting on the emergence of the National Congress, which would represent both a personal achievement and a possible catalyst for the internal Syrian opposition. He downplayed the likelihood that the Syrian security services would be able to shut down the Congress, given its long list of respected figures, unless they were able to launch a pre-emptive campaign of intimidation and arrests before Seif stands up the organization and gets it publicly launched. We suspect that Seif, a relentless optimist, may be miscalculating to a degree the capabilities of the security services and the amount of pressure and intimidation the regime is likely to bring to bear to stop any launch of the DD-affiliated Congress. While Seif has shown remarkable courage and demonstrated his willingness to go to jail for a sustained period to defy the regime, it remains to be seen whether the enlarged group of cohorts he has recruited will stand firm enough to launch this enterprise and then withstand the pressure to back away and stay silent or face threats of imprisonment and of harm to family members. To some degree, success may depend on timing. The SARG did not respond to the launching of the Damascus Declaration group, when the regime was on its heels after the release of the first Mehlis report in the fall of 2005, but then, apparently feeling more confident (and perhaps also more threatened because of the inclusion of the Lebanon issue), the regime took extremely aggressive action after the launch of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration six months later. It is also

possible, if the Congress keeps as low a profile as the DD has in the past year, that the regime may choose to ignore it.

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